Films *continued*

In the hour and eight minutes of film, there are few badly shot or out of focus scenes.

Originally, filming *The Brig* cost Mekas $950. Finishing and processing a film of *The Brig* for commercial use cost him $4000. For some legal reason, the film of *The Brig* no longer belongs to Jonas Mekas.

It did not surprise Mekas that *The Brig* won the Venice Film Award. What did surprise him was that it won the award as a documentary.

"I found out later some of the critics did not know I was shooting a play. They really thought I was shooting an actual scene in an American Army jail."

ATTENDING the Spring Arts Festival at the U. of Cincinnati this past month, Mekas shot a movie the first day of the festival and showed it the last.

There are now comparable film-makers' cooperatives in London, Rome, Paris and Stockholm.

Mekas says that American underground film makers thought of themselves as nothing more than that until they began seeing underground films from abroad.

Jud Yalkut shoots Allison Knowles and Dick Higgins

"The honesty of underground documentaries is not so much in their topics, but in their approach to topics. Not being responsible to the family audience, they do not pull punches."

"We decided then that we were the same. That all together we were developing a new cinematic language, or technique."

There seems to be an ontological recapitulation in the evolution of this new cinema.

According to Mekas, Andy Warhol has gone through four periods: Silent, such as *Eat;* Sound, such as *The Chelsea Girls;* Decorative, (i.e. color) such as *I, A Man, Bike Boy;* and is now, with *Romeo and Juliet,* (his first film to be edited) in what Mekas refers to as Warhol's Hollywood-1940 Period.

"We all went through the psychedelic phase," said Mekas. "When color was very important to us. Now it is not so important."

The real honesty of Warhol lies not so much in his films as in his satirizing the American Dream of Glittery Hollywood off-camera, in his erection of superstars like Nico, International Velvet, Baby Jane Holzer, Paul America and Ingrid Superstar. Everywhere they go (and they are everywhere) they exist in the corner of the room like ghouls from a 1932 premier, in tuxedoes and tennis shoes, gowns and four-foot earrings. In fact, according to Mekas, Warhol has never been able to sit through one of his own films, even the five and a half hour (a short, by Warhol standards) *Sleep,* for which other members of the Filmmakers' Cooperative offered to tie him into

Bruce Byron in Kenneth Anger's "Scorpio Rising"

a chair to see. (You see, if you look far enough you can find an area of agreement with anybody. Even Warhol.)

AT this point, underground films can be divided into two categories, and application of the word "honest" depends upon in which category a film is. Roughly, there are documentaries and there are sexual fantasies.

Although they have played widely in commercial houses, Warhol's endless films of sexual perversion, lesbianism, homosexuality, sadism, masochism, oral-anal fetishism, what-have-you, would not be expected to be true for a large number of people. Few who see them know they are sexual fantasies (or know what they are). From what I observe, seeing a Warhol film for most people is a never-to-be-repeated experience, like catching a social disease, both experiences being the result of a totally false aura of excitement, glamor and fashion emanating from indifferent quarters.

But *Fireworks,* Kenneth Anger's first film, which explores a boy's private world of sexual fantasy, is far more honest in detail and reveals what can be assumed is a far more universal truth. He shot it with a 16 mm Bolex at age 16, while his parents were away for the weekend.

The honesty of underground documentaries is not so much in their topics, but in their approach to topics. For the most part they deal with the same social problems you see on newsreels, but the understanding they stimulate is not apt to be the same. Not being responsible to the family audience, they do not pull punches.

Black Natchez, by Bostonians David Newman and Ed Pincus, is a remarkable record of the progression of *feeling* in a Mississippi black community from nonviolence to militancy during the summer of 1965, when one of their leaders becomes crippled by a Ku Klux Klan bomb.

FILM MAKERS Norman Fruchter and Robert Machover spent three months filming the continuous efforts of a black Newark community to have a stop light put up at an intersection where their children were being slaughtered regularly. This unflinching eye on a mayor's endless political procrastination and of a community's increasing anger at not being able to get even this most reasonable social action makes *The Troublemakers* more articulate on the causes of black rebellion than even the Kerner report.

Unquestionably, Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies,* legally banned by people convinced everything on film is meant to be entertainment, is an extremely valua-

continued

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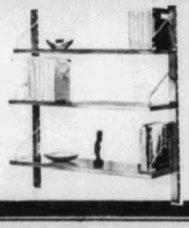

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not become more grabbing than the churchly sermon?)

SO what's honesty?

Well, considering the camera an instrument of art, an extension of the man, like a violin or a paint brush, the underground film maker certainly can express a more personal point of view. And, like *principle: Art, being an observation of irony, does require an individual or dominant perspective.* But the idealist frequently believes the subjective truth more honest than the objective truth. (See the average underground newspaper, right or left.) Very rapidly, from subjectivity, self-indulgence, there develops a precious poesy which has no truth or meaning beyond the personal. Without some effort towards balance, objectivity, coterie art quickly becomes like *who cares*?

And, as film-making is a most mechanical endeavor, frequently what is gained by the underground film maker in art is lost in technique. (At some point I've got to state my contention that the pro with a camera, the guy who's been clicking, grinding away day after day for years has put on film and thrown away more truth than some of these artistes, who put an eight-minute street scene on film and then hold seminars about it, will ever see. Honestly, the auto race shot for a C movie frequently has more truth in it than any drag race shot with blank frames.) To date, not many underground films have had the technical expertise to make specific judgment on the quality of their art or honesty of much value.

"Considering the camera an extension of the man, like a violin or a paint brush, the underground film maker can express a more personal point of view."

AS Martin D'Arcy might say, honesty of any film depends on who makes it. Mutual influences have already been so great that posturing seems silly. (Like I've had enough seminars. I've also had enough profundities over martinis at the St. Regis. Make the bloody film.) A film need not be automatically artistic and honest because it comes from the underground, or inartistic and dishonest because it comes from a commercial producer.

Walter Kerr has written recently that we go to the theater these days out of a sense of loyalty and to the films out of a sense of interest. We go to the undergrounds with a frequently to-be-regretted sense of sock-it-to-me.

At 175 Lexington Avenue, New York, is the Film-makers' Cooperative, to which anyone may send an underground film to be catalogued, kept, and possibly distributed. It is policy to turn no film away. Ownership remains in the hands of the film-maker, and, if the film should be rented out (for one dollar a minute running time) 75% of the proceeds goes to the film maker, 25% to the Cooperative for expenses. If the film should be shown in a commercial house, the film maker gets 10% of the net, which is usually about 3% of gross. The Cooperative's most recent catalogue, listing 600 titles, was mailed to 9000 subscribers throughout the country, the largest proportion being colleges.

As part of the Cooperative is Film-makers' Cinematique, which exhibits films from the Cooperative's library as it wants to, or upon request. Most of today's important directors, such as Antonioni, Fellini, Godard attend exhibits at Cinematique when they are in town.

BOTH the Film-makers' Cooperative and Cinematique are run by Jonas Mekas, a 45-year-old Lithuanian with a prophet-of-Lebanon haircut, who came to this country in 1950 as a displaced person and bought a Bolex the first week he was here. A natural denizen of the underground, Mekas spent the war years in a Nazi concentration camp, having been caught running an underground newspaper in Lithuania. Mekas also edits Film Culture Magazine and writes on underground films for the Village Voice.

Mekas exists as a sort of spokesman for the industry. He also exists as a sort of dubious example of the level of honesty in underground film-making.

His own films incline towards a concentration on the spectacle, the set scene. One of the principal chapters of his 1965-7 cinematic diary is *Circus Notebook,* which he shot in four visits to Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Bros. circus. His present effort is in creating what he calls "Guerrilla Newsreels," in which the current scene (such as a draft card burning) is not too unlike the nightly Huntley-Brinkley effort, except technically it looks like it was shot by Mickey Rooney and politically it looks like it was edited by Fidel Castro. Like much of the current underground press, honesty in Mekas newsreels, "telling it like it is" results too much in the subjective and utterly imbalanced.

HIS film of the environmental drama, *The Brig,* which was produced on the stage of New York's Living Theater, R.I.P., some years ago, is most memorable indeed. But, as is the case with shooting spectacles, the play itself is memorable.

"Shooting *The Brig* was the most exhausting four or five hours of my life. It took me two or three weeks to get it out of my body. The concentration was so great."

Without ever having seen the play, he shot it entirely in one night. And showed it publically the next.

"The artist film-maker must respond to an incident as a person would himself, an artist, do all the seeing, all the editing while the incident itself is in progress."

Onstage, *The Brig* lasts two hours. Mekas' film of *The Brig* lasts 68 mintues.

"I left out scenes I thought too melodramatic for film."

continued

the underground film makers

Story by Gregory Mcdonald
Photos by Fred W. McDarrah

A mixed-media presentation by Andy Warhol, with the Velvet Underground

Jonas Mekas, above right and below, guru of underground film makers, in action and in thought

LIKE commercial flicks are dishonest. They've always given a totally false impression of life, America, values. Like underground flicks (repeat after me) are honest.

So what's dishonesty?

Well, Rock Hudson and Doris Day, if left to their own devices, never would have mussed each other up. They were as genuinely sexy, as Time magazine once said, as two Cadillacs parked suggestively near each other. Roy Rogers rode across America's dusty rug and never got a pimple. Humphrey Bogart sneered at society but always knew a Vassar girl when he gleaned one. Movietone News endlessly saw brave boys off to battle and home again just as clean, (I guess they never filmed the ones who actually got there) always victorious. The American family on Main Street, Filmland, was as packaged, as balanced, as *nothing* as a cereal sixpack.

Hollywood's film were meant as entertainment, escapes from depression, war and the boss's eyebrows. (No matter how intelligent-realistic-artistic films, and the theater, become, I fervently pray Mr. Buhldorn they never cease to exist as at least partly entertainment. There will always be wars, depressions and bosses' eyebrows and there should always be Hitchcock blowing your mind on a Riviera road.) And, like *principle: Lies are essential to fiction, which is an art through which truth can be seen.* (The point should be made near the top of any rap about underground films that they have not yet tried narrative fiction. As yet, they have had no need of the skillful lie.) And, as Professor Howard Mumford Jones once pointed out, the values Hollywood presented furnished the lower classes with a sort of stiff information about, an imitation of upper class behavior which did, in fact, substantially create today's middle class manners. (Have you ever wondered what your cereal-sixpack family would look like if, at some point, the moviehouse parable had

continued

ble document on asylum life (at Bridgewater) in the middle of the "enlightened" twentieth century.

Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* is probably *The Birth of A Nation* of *cinema verite*. It is a remarkable combination of documentary truth and, for once, *objective* truth on sexual fantasy.

Using genuinely superior film technique, Anger examines the black-leather male sex fantasy of a motorcycle gang by how they relate to their totems, from medallions to pistons to hero posters, and draws out of all these strange play objects understanding of the basic homosexual nature of such a gang.

Although you can't envision any of these latter films running at the corner movie house, their value as incisive human documents is incalculable.

YET one gets the idea that underground film makers would trade their freedom of poverty for the freedom of riches any minute. They are too proud when Antonioni asks to see their films, Understandably, they dream of the day in which they have both freedom and money.

"Today's high proportion of films which have artistic merit and statement is partly due to the guy shooting his own personality through an eight-millimeter camera."

Technically, the most successful underground film maker is Fred Barzyk, who has never been referred to before as an underground film-maker for the same reason he is successful: he has $200,000 a year to spend.

(The impression that the underground film maker works totally alone is totally false. For a six minute "Guerrilla Newsreel", Jonas Mekas credits nine people other than himself. Warhol couldn't be bribed to look through a camera himself. Kenneth Anger is the only well-known underground film maker who has a high personal technical competence.)

Barzyk's honesty is in dropping the autocratic movie-mogul bit.

In filming the weekly television show, *What's Happening, Mister Silver?*, which originates from Boston's educational Channel 2, Barzyk offers the original idea and then lets everybody from cameraman to make-up artist contribute experimental ideas as to how to make that idea most effective. Besides continuously using such literary techniques as metaphor, simile and ironic juxtaposition, Barzyk's use of color patterns, lens shaping, and rhythmical camera movement places him well ahead of anyone experimenting with film above or underground.

AND what's happening is that the rich young creative types, especially those who have made piles of money in the music/poetry business, are just about to pour masses of dough into the underground movie business. The Beatles, individually and together, want to direct their own "non-commercial" films. Bob Dylan, who was a victim of a *cinema verite* movie, D. A. Pennebaker's "Don't Look Back" (which revealed him as a nervous, impatient and *small* man; when he first saw it, he thought it would destroy him forever) has been playing around with film during his year out of the public view, and says he might produce an underground movie sometime. Phil Ochs has said that he wants his latest album, the beautiful wonderful great "Pleasures of the Harbor" (which he put together like a movie scenario) to do well enough so that both the money and the market will be available for an underground movie he wants to make.

Norman Mailer (right) and Buzz Farbar in "Wild Go", by D. A. Pennebaker

Andy Warhol with Viva, one of his starlet stable

IT will be interesting to see what happens in the next few years as money pours into the film underground.

Can the *cinema verite* keep its honesty?

My guess is yes, understanding what that honesty is, because this kind of honesty has already proven extremely profitable with this huge, film-crazy, McLuhanesque, sock-it-to-me generation. You may never see *Scorpio Rising* at your village playhouse, but a small number of such films have already proven enormously profitable. And, the people who have got the money to put into underground films, like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, only made the money because their idea of truth proved to be of most commercial value.

Can the underground film ever get away from the documentary and become narrative?

"Such things as the coming Democratic convention in Chicago will force us to the narrative," Jonas Mekas said.

Dylan, Ochs and the Beatles make it clear their interest in the underground film is in the narrative. Being writers, it is the narrative sense they think they can bring to *cinema verite*.

What will happen to the commercial motion picture producers?

It has already happened that movies have become more and more the director's art, and therefore much more of an art. Today's high proportion of both European and American films which have genuine artistic merit and statement is partly due to the guy shooting his own personality through an eight-millimeter and, perhaps of more importance, liberalizing the audience.

Gregory Mcdonald is on The Globe staff. Fred McDarrah is chief photographer for New York's Village Voice.